

1/31/22 Monday

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Only 'Handful of Weeks Left' Before JCPOA Return Deemed Impossible, Senior US Official Claims

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Even though negotiations on reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal seem to be nearing success, American officials have repeatedly claimed that time is running out. However, Tehran has rejected the characterization, saying the US should focus on success in the talks instead of what will happen if they fail.

Although returning to negotiations in Vienna took place several months after Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi took office in August, shortly after the seventh round concluded in December, an eighth round began, and the two sides seem to have an increasing number of points they agree upon.

The US left the nuclear deal in 2018, pulling out unilaterally and reimposing economic sanctions against Iran after claiming it had secretly violated the 2015 deal, which restricts how much uranium Iranian officials can refine and at what purity. After most other nations party to the deal agreed to follow US sanctions, Tehran began backing off its commitments under the deal, increasing the quality and quantity of uranium it produced in a calculated bid to pressure Washington toward returning to the deal.

The US began talks paving a path to returning to the nuclear agreement shortly after the inauguration of US President Joe Biden, who said the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) had been the best way to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, despite Tehran's pleadings it is not pursuing such a weapon.

"We are in the final stretch because as we've said now for some time, this can't go on forever because of Iran's nuclear advances," an unnamed senior US State Department official told reporters during a Monday press briefing.

"We only have a handful of weeks left to get a deal, after which point it will unfortunately be no longer possible to return to the JCPOA," they added.

The official explained that the timeline came from Washington's belief that Iran would soon reach a "breakout" point that would accelerate their pursuit of a nuclear weapon.

"I think it is fair to say that when it comes to their capacity to have enough material, in which weapons grade for [a] bomb, we are talking about weeks, not months. That's different from the timeline for weaponization, for having a bomb, but we are very focused on the JCPOA, on ensuring that they don't reach that threshold in terms of breakout timeline on the enrichment side," the official said on Monday.

However, the US has made such claims about time running out before. After the seventh round concluded last month, White House national security adviser [Jake Sullivan said](#) the talks would end "within weeks," when it became clear "whether Iran is ready for the diplomatic solution."

After US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [made similar comments](#) earlier in January, Iranian

Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Saeed Khatibzadeh fired back](#), saying the Americans “need to make every effort to show that they have the necessary will and capacity for a Plan A” instead of talking about “Plan B.”

“Blinken knows better than anyone that every country has a B Plan for itself and that Iran’s Plan B may not be very appealing to them,” Khatibzadeh added.

The Vienna talks have been taking place between intermediaries since the Americans refused to negotiate directly with their Iranian counterparts. The Biden administration [has sent indications](#) it might be willing to engage in direct talks, but the unnamed State Department official said on Monday they had “not met directly yet.”

“We have no indication that’s going to be the case when we reconvene,” the official said. “These are complicated negotiations with room for a lot of misunderstanding, a lot of misinterpretation and miscommunication, and we think it would be facilitated by direct talks and accelerated by direct talks.”

Nukes Given Up Decades Ago

Iran once had a nuclear weapons program in the 1950s, when it was still a monarchy closely allied with the US and UK. Western cooperation ceased and the program went underground after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which brought a nationalist, anti-Western government to power, and continued when Iraq invaded Iran the following year, as Iraq was also in pursuit of a nuclear weapon. However, the International Atomic Energy Association [\(IAEA\) said Iranian](#) nuclear weapon experiments ended in 2003, and that their entire program was shut down by 2009, when Ayatollah Ali [Khamenei issued a ruling](#) declaring using nuclear weapons, and all weapons of mass destruction, to be violations of Islam.

When the US left the JCPOA in 2018, then-US President Donald Trump claimed Iran had secretly revived its nuclear weapons program and was once again pursuing a bomb. However, Iran has denied those claims, and the Trump administration never produced compelling evidence to the deal’s other signatories, which include the UK, France, Germany, Russia, China, and the European Union.

More recently, Israeli military intelligence [said in October 2021](#) that while Iran had produced a “disturbing” amount of U-235, “in all other aspects of the Iranian nuclear project, we see no progress - not in the weapons project, in the financial area, not in any other sector.”

“To the best of our knowledge, the directive has not changed and they are not heading toward a breakout,” Maj. Gen. Tamir Hayman, then head of Israel’s Military Intelligence Directorate, told Walla News. “They are not heading toward a bomb right now: It may be in the distant future.”

[Iran says it has only](#) produced uranium to a purity of 60% U-235, which is insufficient to produce a nuclear bomb. According to the [Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory](#), the US research center responsible for designing many of the Pentagon’s nuclear weapons, a weapon using uranium with a purity of less than 90% “would not be practicable to design” as it would be prohibitively large to be used as a weapon.

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Watch: China’s Tianwen-1 Mars Orbiter Snaps Selfie With Red Planet’s Mysterious Ice Caps

By - Morgan Artyukhina

China's first Mars probe, Tianwen-1, has been in orbit around the Red Planet for nearly a year, and recently unfolded its "selfie stick" for an exterior inspection.

New video released by the China National Space Administration (CNSA) on Monday shows the Tianwen-1 orbiter whisking over Mars' polar ice caps, giving a glimpse of its mysterious water-carbon dioxide ice dunes.

The video was snapped by Tianwen-1's "selfie stick," an inspection tool mounted on the end of a memory material that extends out 5.2 feet once unfurled. [China Global Television](#) noted that the orbiter's engine, propellant tank and attitude control engine all look very good after a year and a half in space, one year of which it's spent orbiting Mars.

The probe previously [snapped high-definition images](#) of the Martian ice caps in March 2021, showing how strong winds have buffeted the sand dunes on which the ice deposits sit. Much of the ice recondenses on the caps each winter, then sublimates directly into a gas in the thin Martian atmosphere during warmer months. Scientists believe understanding the Martian ice caps is key to both understanding [Mars' past evolution](#) and to any hope of finding [evidence of life](#) on the planet.

Tianwen-1, whose name translates to "questions about heaven," blasted off from Wenchang on China's Hainan island on July 23, 2020, taking advantage of an unusually close pass between the planets to zip over to Mars in just six months' time, arriving in orbit on February 10, 2021. After orbiting for a few months, Tianwen-1 sent down its landing vehicle, which landed successfully and deployed [the Zhurong rover](#), which has wandered Mars' Utopia Planitia since May 2021.

Tianwen-1 is China's first probe to reach Mars, and when its lander touched down, China became just the third Earth nation to successfully softly land a vehicle on Mars, after the United States and the Soviet Union. China is the second nation to deploy a rover on Mars, since the USSR's Mars 2 and 3 landers in 1971 both failed to deploy their rovers.

Having dropped off its rover, in November, Tianwen-1 assumed [a wider elliptical orbit](#) at a high inclination, allowing it to begin a global remote sensing mapping project of the planet's entire surface, including its icy poles. The new orbit also allows Tianwen-1 to continue performing its other role as a communications relay between Zhurong on the surface and CNSA mission command in Beijing.

CNSA said on Monday that Zhurong has covered about 0.9 miles in 25 Martian days, which are about 40 minutes longer than an Earth day.

Last month, Zhang Rongqiao, head of the Tianwen mission, [said that Tianwen-2](#), which will aim to explore asteroids, is ready to proceed to the prototype stage. He also told CGTN that the program would return to Mars with the Tianwen-3 mission and aim to send a soil sample back to Earth, perhaps around 2030. A prospective Tianwen-4 mission would aim to visit Jupiter and two of its many moons.

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Photos: US Navy's F-35 Stealth Fighters Seem to be Rusting on South China Sea Voyage
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Lockheed Martin's F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is notorious for its myriad failings despite being a technically advanced and expensive aircraft. Having already been barred from flying during thunderstorms or soaring above the speed of sound for long periods, its newest nemesis may be sea spray.

Recent photos from the US Navy's latest deployment to the South China Sea yielded some unexpected information about the Navy's most advanced aircraft: they seem to be rusting. The photos come from the USS Carl Vinson and USS Abraham Lincoln, two Nimitz-class supercarriers that have been carrying out flight operations in the South China Sea over the last few weeks. [Both warships deployed](#) with 10 F-35Cs on board, a version of the stealth aircraft optimized for the rough-and-tumble life of being launched off the front of a carrier by a catapult during takeoff and yanked to a halt when they land on the back. Another six F-35Bs, the vertical takeoff-and-landing (VTOL) version of the jet, are onboard the USS America, an amphibious assault ship not far away in the Philippine Sea.

A global spotlight was shone on this deployment last week when one of the F-35Cs [slammed into the back](#) of the Carl Vinson, injuring seven crew members before sliding off the deck and landing in the sea.

However, it was The Drive's [The War Zone](#) that first noticed the brown markings that seem to be on top of all the F-35Cs on the ship among the dozens of photos published on the Pentagon's Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS) media hub.

But that couldn't be rust, right? After all, the F-35 is a highly advanced aircraft, made out of futuristic lightweight materials that disguise its silhouette from radar screens, [costs \\$78 million each](#), and just generally looks really expensive. It wouldn't be made out of plain old iron, would it?

Apparently not so. According to [Smithsonian Magazine](#), a common type of radar-absorbent material (RAM) is iron ball paint, which contains tiny pyramids of carbonyl iron ferrite that turn a normally-clear radar return into a chaotic scramble of radar waves, only a small portion of which make their way back to the radar receiver.

Every US stealth aircraft has used it, including the SR-71, B-2, F-117, F-22 and the F-35. China's J-20 likely uses it, too. However, only the carrier-borne B and C variants of the F-35 have ever come anywhere near the briny foam [so infamous for accelerating](#) the oxidation of iron.

One might assume that Lockheed Martin would plan for such a problem, but considering the plethora of failings in its design the defense giant would also have been expected to anticipate - such as not handling being [struck by lightning](#) or [vibrations caused](#) by flying above the speed of sound - the defense giant overlooking the effects of seawater on its stealth paint seems less far-fetched. On the other hand, it might simply not be that much of a problem beyond being an eyesore.

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DeSantis Pressured to Denounce Spox's Comments Suggesting Neo-Nazi Rally Was 'Dem Staffers'

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Comments on social media over the weekend by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' spokesperson, Christina Pushaw, provoked outrage on the left after she suggested that a demonstration by neo-Nazis near a Florida highway was actually Democrats in disguise. Several anti-Semitic [incidents were reported](#) over the weekend, which came days after Holocaust Remembrance Day, which commemorates the 1945 liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp by the Soviet Red Army, a death camp where the Nazis exterminated roughly 1 million Jews because they believed them to be racially inferior.

One occurred on an overpass over Interstate-4 outside of Orlando, Florida, on Sunday. Photos snapped by drivers showed at least 20 individuals with several Nazi flags, as well as signs and banners hanging from the bridge, reading "Vax the Jews" and "Let's Go Brandon," the latter of which is a right-wing meme used as a minced oath for "f*** Biden."

According to [local news](#), the group yelled profanities and anti-Semitic slurs at passing vehicles and got into at least one physical altercation with someone not affiliated with their group.

The demonstration drew widespread condemnation from both major parties, including Republican Speaker of the Florida House [Chris Sprowls](#) and Democratic Orlando Mayor [Buddy Dyer](#). US Sen. [Rick Scott](#), a former Florida governor and a Republican, also condemned the demonstration. However, Pushaw had her own thoughts about things.

"Do we even know they're Nazis? Or is this a stunt like the 'white nationalists' who crashed the Youngkin rally in Charlottesville and turned out to be Dem staffers? I trust Florida law enforcement to investigate and am awaiting their conclusions."

As it happens, [Florida Highway Patrol](#) tweeted just two hours later they had "disbanded an anti-Semitic gathering on the overpass" over I-4.

The spokesperson was referring to an October 2021 incident in which several members of the "Never-Trump" Republican group The Lincoln Project [dressed up as attendees](#) of the August 2017 "Unite the Right" rally by neo-Nazis and other white supremacists held in Charlottesville, Virginia, complete with "tiki torches." They then went to an event in the city hosted by Republican candidate Glenn Youngkin - now the Old Dominion's governor - and stood outside his campaign bus.

Following widespread fury about the comment, Pushaw deleted the tweet, but [added that she](#) "only deleted it because I found out after that tweet that 'National Socialist Movement' is an extremist group that isn't connected to John Weaver's Lincoln Project."

Many pointed out there was an inherent danger in minimizing the [rise of far-right groups](#), not only because of the history of Nazism but also because even on the sidelines, such groups [carry out hate attacks](#) on a variety of targets, from Jews to Black people and members of the LGBTQ community.

"The very idea that the governor's press representative suggesting such Neo-Nazis were fake is reprehensible," Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, of Temple Israel in Palm Beach, told [Politico on Monday](#). "This is the time for the public to be aware of the dangers of anti-Semitic extremism and not to traffic in the denial of that extremism."

The rabbi called on DeSantis to denounce his spokesperson's comments. The Florida governor [has claimed to be](#) "the most pro-Israel Governor in America" and raised his voice [last summer to condemn](#) Vermont-based ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's for complying with the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) boycott of the West Bank, which the United Nations says is illegally occupied by Israel.

"When you consider that South Florida has the third-largest Jewish population in the country, and one of [the] most significant Jewish populations in the world, such silence on his part [is] tantamount to agreement," Salkin added.

However, Pushaw seemed to dismiss those calls out of hand, [asking on Monday](#), "if the governor himself does not issue a public statement of specific condemnation of whoever this group is, within a time period that the Left deems acceptable, he is smeared as a Nazi sympathizer by default?"

She also [retweeted a comment](#) by journalist Karol Markowicz suggesting that Democrats are "using Jews" to try and tarnish DeSantis' supposed "philo-Semitic" credentials, using a term [commonly invoked](#) by Christian Zionists, who support Israel because they believe Jews returning to the Levant will bring about the End of Days and their own forced conversion to Christianity.

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US Judge Rejects Federal Plea Deal Meant to Avert Hate Crimes Trial for Ahmaud Arbery Killing

By - Evan Craighead

It was previously reported that Greg and Travis McMichael, the father and son convicted of murdering 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery on February 23, 2020, could avoid being tried on federal hate crime charges due to a plea agreement that was filed late Sunday by prosecutors for the US Department of Justice.

US District Court Judge Lisa Godbey Wood moved to reject a federal prosecutors' proposed plea agreement with Greg and Travis McMichael during a Monday pretrial hearing.

Wood noted that the proposed deal would restrict her to set terms during sentencing, which would not be appropriate for such a case.

The McMichaels have until Friday to determine whether they intend to plead guilty.

The decision comes ahead of a February 7 trial in the US Southern District of Georgia, where the McMichaels and William "Roddie" Bryan, the third man convicted in Arbery's death, will face hate crime charges alleging that Arbery, who was Black, was racially targeted by the white men. All three men have been sentenced to life in prison for their respective roles in the 2020 murder. Lee Merritt, an attorney for Arbery's family, proclaimed that the proposed agreement with federal prosecutors amounted to "a huge accommodation to the men who hunted down and murdered Ahmaud Arbery."

Merritt claimed that the agreement would allow the McMichaels to spend the first three decades of their life sentences in federal prison, rather than the typical, less comfortable state prison.

Wanda Cooper Jones, Arbery's mother, issued an accompanying statement asserting that the US DoJ went behind her back to offer the McMichaels "a deal to make their time in prison easier to serve."

The proposed agreement made no mention of Bryan.

"Ahmaud is a kid you cannot replace," Marcus Arbery, the victim's father, told reporters outside of the Brunswick courthouse. "He was killed racially and we want 100% justice, not no half justice."

The 25-year-old's graphic murder was captured by Bryan, who joined the McMichaels in pursuing Arbery as he was jogging for exercise through the Satilla Shores neighborhood on February 23, 2020. After catching up to Arbery via their pickup truck, Travis McMichael exited the vehicle with a gun, prompting a brief struggle between him and the 25-year-old. Arbery was fatally shot moments later.

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'No Way Out' for Boris Johnson as PM's Ego Converges With Met Probe & Gray Report, Expert Claims

By - Evan Craighead

The Metropolitan Police Service has confirmed that it is currently probing eight of 12 parties that were allegedly held at 10 Downing Street amid the UK government-ordered COVID-19 lockdown. The scandal's progression to police inquiry has forced many UK lawmakers to question their support of Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Moments after the inquiry was made public, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson issued an address to Parliament apologizing for the occurrence of several parties that were in violation of his government's own COVID-19 lockdown measures.

The Met probe was made public via the Gray report, a government review compiled by British civil servant Sue Gray that outlined 16 social events over the past two years of the pandemic. The Gray report noted that there was a "serious failure" to observe the standards expected of government officials, including the consumption of alcohol at the workplace.

"I know what the issue is," Johnson claimed. "It is whether this government can be trusted to deliver and I say yes we can be trusted, yes we can be trusted to deliver."

The prime minister's remarks did little to silence lawmakers wishing to see the full, unredacted Gray report.

UK Labour Party leader Keir Starmer highlighted that, unlike Johnson and his staff, those in the UK abided by the COVID-19 mitigation measures and lockdown guidelines. He emphasized that in many cases Brits were unable to be with their loved ones in their final moments.

The Labour Party leader applauded those who followed rules set by Johnson, as those individuals "saved the lives of people they will probably never meet."

"By routinely breaking the rules he set, the prime minister took us all for fools. He held people sacrificing contempt. He showed himself unfit for office. His desperate denials since he was

exposed have only made matters worse," Starmer said, accusing the prime minister of hiding behind the Metropolitan police probe.

While Johnson initially promised to take action following the release of the Gray report, action by or against the prime minister cannot occur until after the probe is wrapped by police.

"Once again, he is kicking the can into the future," Dr. Sarah Lieberman, senior lecturer in politics and international relations at Canterbury Christ Church University, told Sputnik. Lieberman highlighted that Johnson has not stated whether he would resign over the Met's inquiry.

"He will, apparently stay on to fix the problems inherent in Downing Street—once again acting as though those problems are not largely due to his own decisions, behaviours, and lack of concern for laws and Parliamentary Conventions," Lieberman said.

Johnson's deflection tactics are widely considered to be a key element of his persona, built on bravado and being the center of attention, according to Alistair Jones, associate professor of politics at De Montfort University in the UK.

"There is no way out for Boris Johnson," Jones said, "but he will carry on regardless."

He argued that the upcoming elections may not swing in the Conservative Party's favor if Johnson remains in power.

It is unclear whether this is possible, however, as lawmakers would be able to rally the necessary 54-letter threshold for a confidence ballot, and then get more than half of the 359 Tory lawmakers to vote against the prime minister.

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'We're Never Getting That Album': Jokes and Drake Memes Flood Twitter as Rihanna Reveals Baby Bump

By - Evan Craighead

Rihanna, 33, was accompanied by boyfriend A\$AP Rocky, 33, in New York on Monday for a series of paparazzi flicks that doubled as the Barbadian singer and designer's pregnancy announcement. The now-viral baby bump comes about five months after the fashion-forward couple turned heads and raised eyebrows at the Met Gala with their oversized parkas. Donning an oversized Chanel puffer jacket with colorful jewels and a gold cross adorning her midsection, Rihanna debuted her baby bump and all but verbally confirmed mounting suspicions that she is pregnant and expecting her first child with beau A\$AP Rocky, real name Rakim Mayers.

Photographs of the couple were captured in the Harlem borough of New York City, the neighborhood in which A\$AP Rocky grew up.

Several snaps were taken during the session, featuring the couple together and solo shots of a visibly pregnant Rihanna.

In May 2021, A\$AP Rocky gushed about finding love in a COVID-19 pandemic with Rihanna, referring to Robyn Fenty as the "love of my life" and "the one."

"I think I'd be an incredible, remarkably overall amazing dad," he said at the time, adding that starting a family is in his "destiny."

"I would have a very fly child. Very," said the "Fashion Killa" rapper.

Rihanna has also been candid about her desire to have children, and told British Vogue in March 2020 that she adopted a new approach to living after coming to the realization that life is short.

"When you're overwhelmed, you need to start cutting things out. And I'm overwhelmed too much," Rihanna told the magazine, shortly after parting ways with billionaire Hassan Jameel, a boyfriend of three years. "What's happening now is that I'm going back to black and white. My gray area is shutting down."

She went on to detail that she imagines having "three or four" children. A partner, however, was not a necessity.

"The only thing that matters is happiness; that's the only healthy relationship between a parent and a child," Rihanna said. "That's the only thing that can raise a child truly, is love."

As celebrity friends like rapper Nicki Minaj rushed to congratulate Rihanna on her pregnancy reveal and the experiences to come, it would appear the pop star's fanbase is not too thrilled with the news for a variety of reasons, ranging from gripes with Rihanna's music hiatus to concerns about A\$AP Rocky as a partner and father.

There was also a section of social media humorously mourning the loss of a chance to get with Rihanna. Several viral tweets notably brought up rapper Drake, who was notoriously rejected by Rihanna after he referred to her as "someone I've been in love with since I was 22" while presenting the singer with the Vanguard Award at the 2016 MTV Video Awards.

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NASA's James Webb Space Telescope Preparing for First Observations

By - Nevin Brown

NASA's \$10 billion James Webb space telescope is entering its final preparations before becoming operational. The telescope arrived at its final location several days ago, after leaving Earth on December 25. It has turned on many of its instruments, and has successfully experienced 50 major deployments.

The James Webb space telescope has arrived at its final Earth-sun Lagrange Point destination. The region is some 930,000 miles from Earth and was selected by astrophysicists and NASA for being a gravitationally stable spot that allows for fuel conservation and, most importantly, is incredibly cold.

The James Webb telescope is designed to operate at 45 Kelvin or the equivalent to -375 Fahrenheit and -228 Celsius. The telescope has a sunshield to remain cool, which was successfully deployed earlier this month.

On Friday, Jonathan Gardner, James Webb deputy senior project scientist at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, [told those at a town hall event](#), "There were 50 major deployments; they have all been successful."

According to Gardner, "The sunshield reflects the sunlight directly at the Earth, and [sometimes] has a glint and at other times, it's more diffuse light."

The newly-deployed sunshield will make the Webb telescope visible from earth, even for amateur astronomers.

Mike McElwain, Webb observatory project scientist, said, "We'll be aligning the telescope; that's about a three month process that we're planning to begin early next week."

Calibrating the telescope will take time as its performance will vary as it continues to cool down. The next step in commissioning the Webb telescope is for the science instruments to become operational.

Jane Rigby, Webb operations project scientist, said it will be a "two-month intense period where we check out the science instruments and get them ready for science operations."

The difficulty in getting the Webb telescope's science instruments is largely down to trial and error according to Rigby.

"Each observing mode has specific quantitative criteria for science readiness that say, 'Okay, this looks ready to go,'" she said. "It doesn't mean it is perfect, [but] it means that this looks like it is ready to start science operations."

Cycle 1 is expected to begin around June 25 if everything remains on schedule and the first images from the Webb telescope will be released around that time. All commissioning data will be made public.

The Webb telescope has enough fuel to be operational for an estimated 20 years, although that could change depending on a multitude of factors. Scientific proposals for Cycle 2 are due by January 2023.

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Video: China Airlines Cargo Aircraft Crashes Into Baggage Carts at Chicago O'Hare Airport
By - Nevin Brown

On Saturday, January 29, a China Airlines cargo Boeing 747-400F at Chicago O'Hare Airport crashed into baggage carts while taxiing. The incident did not result in any injuries.

The aircraft, before landing in Chicago, Illinois, had operated cargo flights between Taipei, Taiwan, and Anchorage, Alaska.

The aircraft suffered damage on its left-hand-side engines, according to emergency services. No injuries were reported.

The extent of damage to multiple baggage carts and their contents, parts of which were seen to be sucked into the engine intake cowling, is unknown.

The video shows a light snowfall with [temperatures below freezing](#) in the Chicago area. The region had experienced light snow and ice Thursday night into Friday morning.

The cause of the accident remains unknown and China Airlines, based out of Taiwan, has yet to release an official statement regarding the accident.

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Biden: US Desires Diplomacy But 'Ready No Matter What Happens' If Ukraine Tensions Worsen
By - Nevin Brown

On Monday, US President Joe Biden reiterated the United States' commitment to diplomacy as tensions between Russia, Ukraine, and NATO worsened.

[Biden told reporters](#), "We continue to urge diplomacy as the best way forward, but with Russia continuing its buildup of its forces around Ukraine, we are ready no matter what happens". Biden spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky last week, and the president continues what he referred to as "non-stop diplomacy".

"I had a productive talk last week with President Zelensky, and we continue to engage in non-stop diplomacy".

According to CNN, however, the purported "productive" talks were not well-received by Biden's Ukrainian counterpart. A senior Ukrainian official claimed that there is a disconnect over the difference between the two sides' risk in the event of a Russian invasion.

White House National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne dismissed reports of a disconnect between Kiev and Washington as false.

The White House confirmed they have sanction packages ready, should the situation call for it, that target Russian elites and their families.

[According to the White House](#), the targets "are in or near the inner circle of the Kremlin, play a role in government decision making or at a minimum complicit in the Kremlin's destabilising behaviour".

Biden Backs Move to Designate Qatar as 'Major Non-NATO Ally'

On Monday, Biden said he would notify Congress of his intention to designate Qatar as a key non-NATO ally. He is said to have made the decision while meeting with Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, in the Oval Office.

The two reportedly discussed regional security and a push for equal rights for Palestinians. Europe and several NATO allies are gripped by an energy crisis. Russia supplies over 30% of Europe's natural gas and is the continent's most crucial source of energy. With the threat of sanctions and a potential conflict over the purported buildup of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border, Europe and NATO have looked to find alternative energy exporters to meet their demand. Qatar has been one of the nations [reportedly chosen](#) to help ease Europe's energy crunch.

Pentagon: Troops on 'Heightened Alert' Over Ukraine Crisis Have Not Been Given Deployment Orders

Last week, the United States military put 8,500 troops stationed in the US on "heightened alert" for deployment to Eastern Europe and the Baltic States, according to Pentagon press secretary John Kirby.

"They have not been given deployment orders", Kirby said. "They've just been told to be ready on a shorter period of time in case the alliance activates that".

According to Kirby, the troops could be deployed in five days if called upon. US troops already stationed in Europe could also be called up. The majority of troops are ground forces and would be part of a NATO response force in the event, according to Washington and its allies, that Russia engaged Ukraine in a military conflict.

Kirby told reporters the Pentagon's decision came down to a belief that "it is very clear the Russians have no intentions of de-escalating".

A deployment of troops would reportedly not be a US military decision, but rather a NATO decision, according to Kirby.

US Open Talks Proposal on Ukraine 'Classic Example of Megaphone Diplomacy'

The US has approached the United Nations in an attempt to gain international support over their allegations that a Russian invasion of Ukraine is an imminent threat. The Kremlin has regularly denied the continuing accusations and has cited NATO's increased military presence on its borders over the past decade as a clear double standard.

The US ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, implored the UN Security Council to look at Russia's actions and not to take Kremlin statements at face value. She added, however, that diplomacy is the preferred course of action.

Washington has asked Moscow to take part in a public meeting to discuss security concerns in the region.

"The United States has been clear. If this is truly about Russia's security concerns in Europe, we're offering them an opportunity to address these concerns at the negotiating table", Thomas-Greenfield said.

Russia's ambassador to the UN, Vassily Nebenzia, called the US request for an open meeting a "classic example of megaphone diplomacy".

He observed that the United States and its allies have failed to provide evidence that an attack is imminent and believes Washington is actually pushing for a worst-case scenario, armed conflict, to occur, as a means of justifying an increased global military footprint.

"Talks about the coming war are provocative by themselves. [The US] seems to be calling for this, wanting and waiting for [war] to happen, as if you want to make your speculations come true", Nebenzia pointed out.

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Mike Pence's Former Chief of Staff Testifies Before Jan. 6 Capitol Riot House Panel
By - Nevin Brown

Mark Short, who served as chief of staff to former US Vice President Mike Pence, testified to the US House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol last Wednesday, according to a new CNN report. The lengthy in-person testimony came after months of negotiations with Short and his lawyers.

Short is viewed as a key witness by the Select Committee due to his proximity to both the former US President Donald Trump and former US Vice President Mike Pence in the lead up to the deadly January 6 attack of the US Capitol.

Of particular interest to the committee is Short's participation in a January 4, 2021, meeting in which Trump and attorney John Eastman tried to convince the then-vice president to overturn the results of the presidential election. Eastman had prepared a memo suggesting that Pence could toss the election results in several battleground states and force the election to go through the House of Representatives.

The pressure Trump exerted on Pence to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election has become increasingly important to the committee's investigation.

Committee chairman Bennie Thompson (D-MS), has said that he expects Pence to be invited to testify, but they have yet to formally ask. [Sources](#) have suggested that Pence hopes the testimony of aides will satisfy the committee and negate the need for him to appear.

Pence's decision to obey the rule of law angered Trump and put his hopes of a 2024 presidential bid on precarious ground.

Trump said of Pence, "He could have overturned the Election!"

Before questioning Short, the committee questioned Pence's former national security adviser, retired General Keith Kellogg. According to Kellogg's testimony, Trump attempted to coerce Pence into overturning the results.

Kellogg told the committee at the time that Trump taunted Pence by saying: "You're not tough enough to make the call."

The testimony of Kellogg aligns with what Trump made public through his now-deleted Twitter account.

On January 6, 2021, [Trump tweeted](#): "Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our country and our Constitution, giving states a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth!"

The details of Short's testimony have not been revealed. Both Short and a spokesperson for the committee declined to comment on the details of the inquiry.

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US State Dept. Orders Diplomats' Families to Leave Belarus Amid 'Concerning' Border Tensions
By - Nevin Brown

The United States Department of State (DOS) has issued a Level Four, do not travel, advisory for Belarus "due to the arbitrary enforcement of laws, the risk of detention, and unusual and concerning Russian military buildup along Belarus' border with Ukraine. Reconsider travel due to COVID-19 and related entry restrictions."

[The travel advisory](#), issued on January 31, came in conjunction with the DOS ordering the departure of family members of US government employees from Belarus.

The state department cited Russian military activity along the border with Ukraine and the unpredictability of the situation as their chief concerns.

The DOS order also cited the US government's already limited ability to provide US citizens emergency services due to the Belarusian government's limitations on US Embassy staffing, as the potential of an armed conflict intensifies those concerns.

In the DOS' country summary, they claim "Belarusian authorities have detained tens of thousands of individuals, including US citizens, for alleged affiliations with opposition parties and alleged participation in political demonstrations. US citizens in the vicinity of the demonstrations have been arrested."

Concerns over Covid were also mentioned. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have a Level Three travel health notice for Belarus, indicating a high level of Covid in the country.

Belarus and Ukraine share a 674-mile border. [According to reports](#), Russian troops have been steadily entering the former country. Russian and Belarusian officials say the build-up is to complete joint military exercises focused on defense.

On January 27, [the Belarusian Ministry of Defence](#) said the Russian troops will leave once the two militaries' joint exercises have been completed. The [second phase of their joint exercise](#) is set to take place between February 10 and 20.

On January 23, the US DOS issued a similar order for family members of government employees at the US Embassy to Ukraine in Kiev.

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Georgia DA Probing Election Interference Requests FBI Security Analysis After Trump's Rally Remarks

By - Nevin Brown

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis requested an FBI security-risk assessment of the city courthouse and an adjacent government center following remarks made by former US President Donald Trump at a rally in Conroe, Texas. Willis is leading a criminal probe into election interference by Trump while he was president.

Willis, [in a letter to the FBI](#), wrote, "security concerns were escalated this weekend by the rhetoric of former President Trump." Willis is referencing a remark that Trump made about the multitude of investigations centered on him.

At a rally in Conroe, Texas, Trump told supporters, "If these radical, vicious, racist prosecutors do anything wrong or illegal, I hope we are going to have the biggest protests we have ever had in Washington, DC, in New York, in Atlanta and elsewhere because our country and our elections are corrupt."

The January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol, a failed attempt by Trump supporters to prevent the certification of Joe Biden's 2020 presidential win reportedly loomed large over Willis' request to the FBI.

She wrote, "We must work together to keep the public safe and ensure that we do not have a tragedy in Atlanta similar to what happened at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021."

She also cited a Trump remark that suggested he would pardon the rioters as a reason for heightened concern.

Willis' investigation was recently granted a special grand jury by a Georgia judge, a move expected to begin on May 2 that increases her subpoena power.

She told the FBI, "I have an obligation to ensure that those who work and visit the Fulton County Courthouse, the adjoining Fulton County Government Center and surrounding areas are safe," and asked that they, "provide protective resources to include intelligence and federal agents."

An FBI spokesman confirmed the receipt of the letter but declined to comment.

Fulton County has a population of 1.064 million people, making it the largest county in Georgia that also contains approximately 90% of the city of Atlanta.

Willis' investigation is centered on a phone call that Donald Trump, while president, made to the Georgia secretary of state, following the former's loss in the state to Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election.

In the phone conversation, Trump told Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, "I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have. Because we won the state."

The baseless assertion has been repeatedly [rebuked by Georgia state election officials](#).

23 January, 23:21 GMT

The January 23 travel advisory for Ukraine also cited Russian military activities on the Ukrainian border as their primary concern.

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Spotify to Add 'Advisory' Notice After Increasing Backlash Over COVID-19 Misinformation
By - Mary Manley

The chief executive for Spotify, Daniel Ek, responded to growing backlash concerning the threat of COVID-19 misinformation on the streaming platform. Joe Rogan, whose podcast complaints have been leveled against, said he would make changes to his podcast by inviting people with differing opinions onto his show to "balance things out."

In an open [letter](#) posted to Spotify's website, Ek said Spotify would add a "content advisory" notice to any podcast episode that includes a discussion about COVID-19. The notice will direct listeners to a COVID-19 hub. Ek said other actions to be taken would include "publishing their long-standing platform rules," which will be accessible to content creators and listeners.

"We will also begin testing ways to highlight our Platform Rules in our creator and publisher tools to raise awareness around what's acceptable and help creators understand their accountability for the content they post on our platform," said Ek.

"Based on the feedback over the last several weeks, it's become clear to me that we have an obligation to do more to provide balance and access to widely-accepted information from the medical and scientific communities guiding us through this unprecedented time," he continued. Rogan posted a nearly 10-minute [video](#) to his Instagram on Sunday attempting to address the controversy surrounding information disseminated on his podcast, "The Joe Rogan Experience." He began the [video](#) by defending two guests, Dr. Peter McCullough and Dr. Robert Malone,

listing their credentials after the pair were heavily criticized for spreading COVID-19 misinformation.

“Both these people are very highly credentialed, very intelligent, very accomplished people and they have an opinion that’s different from the mainstream narrative,” he said in the video.

Rogan signed an exclusive deal with Spotify in 2020 for a [reported](#) \$100 million. His podcast is the most successful in its genre on the platform, with ratings topping in the United States. The dispute over misinformation was sparked by a public letter published by 270 scientists, professors, and public health professionals who asked Spotify to develop a policy to handle health and science misinformation surrounding COVID-19. Their letter cited an episode from Rogan’s podcast that featured Malone.

The Instagram video later saw Rogan acknowledge he had “no hard feelings toward Neil Young,” in reference to the Canadian-American singer’s [public departure](#) from Spotify over the platform’s “very damaging force via its public misinformation and lies about COVID.” Young referenced Rogan in a letter to his management and record label which has since been deleted. Other artists followed in Young’s footsteps shortly thereafter, [including](#) prominent musicians Joni Mitchell and Nils Lofgrin.

On Wednesday when Spotify began removing Young’s music, the company said it had also removed over 20,000 podcast episodes related to COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, Ek claiming in his open letter that from the “very first days of the pandemic,” Spotify had been biased toward action. Rogan’s episode with Malone is still available on Spotify.

“I don’t know what else I can do differently, other than maybe... try harder to get people with differing opinions [on the show]” claimed Rogan. “I’m not trying to be controversial. I’ve never tried to do anything with this podcast other than talk to people. I can’t believe it’s successful as it is.”

Spotify’s stock shares hit a 52-week low of \$164.41 on [Friday](#) after the controversy. Thus far this year, their stock has fallen 26%.

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Millions of Americans Forced to Move as Rent Prices Skyrocket Nearly 40% Across the US
By - Mary Manley

Rent prices in the US rose 14% last year, hitting an average cost of \$1,877 per month. In cities like Austin, New York City, and Miami, costs have increased between 35 and 40%, with inflated prices expected to rise by an additional 10%, according to the real estate firm Redfin.

Higher rent prices are expected to be a key driving force in the coming months. With the cost of living becoming increasingly unaffordable, many Americans are being forced to move, or live in their cars. Three years into the COVID-19 pandemic, rent freezes and eviction moratoriums have expired, no longer aiding those who are struggling to pay rent.

“The fact is, for too many Americans, housing is unaffordable. We have an inadequate supply of homes- for both rent and for sale- and, of course, the lowest income families are being hit

hardest,” Dennis Shea, executive director of the J. Ronald Terwilliger Center for Housing Policy at the Bipartisan Policy Center, [told](#) the Washington Post.

A report by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York states that rent amounts will continue to rise by 10% in 2022. Economists say there is usually a lag around 9 to 12 months before the housing prices are accounted for by inflation measures, and that rent prices alone could be responsible for keeping inflation levels high throughout the year.

In an attempt to weather the storm, the Biden administration began reallocating unused funds from its Emergency Rental Assistance program, which has a net worth of \$46.5 billion. The American president has also vowed to add close to 100,000 affordable homes over the next three years, as well as urging states and local governments to reform zoning laws.

In the late 1970s the US was adding roughly 400,000 entry-level homes a year. In 2020, the market only added 65,000 of those entry-level homes.

Jenny [Schuetz](#), a senior fellow at Brookings Metro, says that to improve housing affordability, three tools must be implemented: reforming land use regulation to allow smaller, more compact housing, increasing taxes on expensive/underused land, and expanding housing subsidies to low-income households.

Zoning reform would readjust a [rule](#) that has pushed many Americans out of being able to buy affordable houses. At present, expensive and often majority white-owned lands have zoning laws in place that prohibit anything from being built other than single-family detached homes. Economists say that unlike inflated food and gas prices, when rent and mortgage costs rise, it's much harder to see that trajectory fall. One in four renters spends more than half their monthly income on rent, according to a 2018 census by Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies. Experts say that figure is even higher this year.

Many people have also reported that despite local rent freezes, some landlords have found ways to gouge their tenants' incomes by tacking on “amenity fees” or charging for services that were otherwise included in their rent.

Aleksei Valentin and his husband had to move from their one bedroom apartment in Frederick, Maryland, to a studio apartment in a neighboring county. He told the Post that during the pandemic, his building started charging them random fines and tacking on amenity fees for items like the trash “not being put out exactly like they liked.” And the more people moved out, the more the amenity fees would increase.

“Prices are so high, inflation is astronomical, and the house my parents bought for \$30,000 in the late 1970s is worth over half a million today,” Valentin said. “How can [we] enter into that market without intergenerational wealth? It's impossible.” The price of their one bedroom when they left was \$1,270. It's now on the market for \$1,600. Valentin, who is 39, says that even buying a tiny house feels like “a pipedream.”

With so many Americans working from home during the pandemic, many who were able to relocate to the suburbs or buy vacation homes did so. This increase in demand left housing prices high, while apartments were left to manage their mounting vacancies. But with people flocking back to cities for an economy which has reopened, landlords now have the upperhand to ask for more out of their tenants income.

Shadow LeMere, who lives in Austin, Texas, is being forced to move her belongings into storage. LeMere and her wife will live in their car and travel up the East Coast until they're able to find

somewhere affordable to live - they're being forced to make the major move after their rent increased by 43%.

"We can't afford to live here anymore," she said. "Not in Austin, not in Texas. We're going to nomad it for a bit and see where we end up." The city of Austin has the fastest increasing rent rate of any major US city this year.

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UN Chief Condemns N. Korea's Missile Launch as Breach of Moratorium, UNSC Resolutions (Adds details in para 4, background in paras 5-6)

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - UN chief Antonio Guterres denounced on Tuesday Pyongyang's mid-range ballistic missile launch as a violation of the moratorium and UN Security Council resolutions.

"The Secretary-General condemns the launch of a ballistic missile of possible intermediate-range by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) on 30 January," his deputy spokesman, Farhan Haq, said in a statement.

"This is a breaking of the DPRK's announced moratorium in 2018 on launches of this nature, and a clear violation of Security Council resolutions," he added.

The UN chief urged North Korea to "desist from taking any further counter-productive actions" and called for all parties to seek a peaceful diplomatic solution.

North Korea launched a Hwasong-12 ballistic missile with a range of 4,500 kilometers (2,796 miles) on Sunday, making it the longest-range missile tested by Pyongyang since 2017.

The launch became North Korea's seventh this year

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University of California Cancels Classes After Ex-Lecturer Threatens Mass Shooting

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The University of California in Los Angeles canceled in-person classes on Tuesday after reports emerged that a former lecturer sent a video referencing a mass shooting and an 800-page manifesto with "specific threats" to members of the university.

"UCPD is actively working with out-of-state law enforcement, including federal agencies, on the threats sent to some members of our community today. We do not have specific information that this individual is in California. Nonetheless, out of an abundance of caution, all classes will be held remotely tomorrow, Feb 1. We will keep you updated on developments," the university said in a statement.

Emails from department leaders told students and faculty that Matthew Harris made a number of threats against the philosophy department, according to Los Angeles Times. Sherrilyn Roush, UCLA's philosophy department chair, reportedly told faculty members to avoid in-person classes "until Harris' location is determined."

"In light of this, we will continue to have a discussion through Zoom until the authorities say that it is safe. I will keep you updated on this situation. But I would avoid being anywhere near Dodd Hall or the philosophy department until further notice," the email sent by a philosophy instructor to students said.

Harris' messages contained a video called "UCLA Philosophy Mass Shooting" and an 800-page manifesto with threats toward some members of the philosophy department.

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Thousands Urged to Evacuate as Blast Feared After Fertilizer Plant Fire in North Carolina

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Thousands in the city of Winston-Salem in North Carolina were urged to evacuate due to fears of an explosion after a massive fire at the Weaver Fertilizer Plant, firefighters and city authorities said on Tuesday.

The fire broke out on Monday evening.

"The evacuation area around 4440 North Cherry Street has almost 6500 residents or 2,497 households," the City of Winston-Salem government tweeted.

The evacuation is necessary since the fumes from the fire are hazardous, the authorities said, adding that there was the potential of a huge ammonia nitrate explosion.

Nearby Wake Forest University announced that it is canceling classes Tuesday due to the impact of the fire.

"Because of the impact of the fire on North Cherry Street, Wake Forest will cancel classes on Tuesday, Feb. 1. Staff who are not needed to support the evacuation effort and are able to work remotely are encouraged to do so. If you are unsure if you should report to campus, contact your supervisor," the university said.

Authorities have not reported any victims as a result of the fire.

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RPT - US Doctor Says Not Afraid to Operate in Ukraine, Russia Despite Tensions

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Prominent US pediatric cardiologist Bill Novick, who is currently operating on children in the Ukrainian city of Lvov, told Sputnik he is not afraid to work there and in Russia despite tensions between the two countries.

"It is strange, we have a lot of people in the US asking me: 'What are you doing? The US is evacuating non-essential personnel from the embassy, are you crazy?'" said Novick, who leads an international team of medical professionals from the US-based Cardiac Alliance. "I just say: 'No, I am not crazy. We have been dealing with Russia and Ukraine for many years,'" he added. Novick shared his impression that life in Lvov is absolutely calm and nobody fears a potential escalation.

The Cardiac Alliance team is establishing a special pediatric cardiac program at Lvov's children's hospital.

"This is our second trip. We have finished up first week, and we have one week left," Novick said.

He and his colleagues already operated on seven children, and have another four or five patients on their schedule, the doctor added.

The Cardiac Alliance specialists are visiting Ukraine and Russia throughout the years and maintaining pediatric cardiac projects in different cities in both countries. Novick also was expressing readiness to work in Donbas in case of request from there.

The perilous situation around Ukraine has worsened over the past several months after Russia was accused by NATO and Ukraine of building up troops near the Ukrainian border and allegedly preparing for an invasion. Russia has consistently denied any plans to invade Ukraine, saying it has the right to move troops inside its territory, responding to what it considers threats to its national security, such as a growing NATO presence in Eastern Europe.

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Blinken Discusses Iran, Palestine With Israeli Counterpart - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed with Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid issues concerning Iran and the Palestinians, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Israeli Foreign Minister and Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid today," Price said in a press release on Monday. "The Secretary and Foreign Minister discussed... threats posed by Iran. Secretary Blinken reiterated the Administration's

steadfast commitment to Israel's security. Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Lapid also discussed Israeli-Palestinian issues."

Price did not provide further details about their discussions on Iran and the Palestinians.

Blinken also had a telephone call earlier in the day with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to reaffirm the United States commitment to a two-state solution, according to Price.

Price said Blinken and Abbas discussed the importance of strengthening the US relationship with the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people, as well as the need to improve quality of life for Palestinians in tangible ways.

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US Lawmakers Urge Blinken to Take Further Steps Toward Establishing Democracy in Myanmar

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of US lawmakers is urging the Biden administration to take further action to establish a democratic regime in Myanmar following a coup d'etat by the country's military in February of 2020, according to a letter sent by members of Congress to Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

"The United States must take steps to address the humanitarian and human rights crises unleashed by the coup, and seek justice for atrocities carried out, both before and after the coup, by the Burmese [Myanmar] military. To do so, the United States must work with more energy to harness the power of like-minded representatives of Burmese democracy, including the National Unity Government, regional partners, civil society, the international community, and other key actors to establish democracy and respect for the rule of law in Burma," the letter said on Monday.

The lawmakers urged the Biden administration to coordinate with foreign governments and businesses cutting off Myanmar military finances, ensuring existing and future sanctions are enforced to the fullest extent possible, convening an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council on the matter and continuing to urge partners and organizations around the world not to recognize or legitimize the new government.

The signatories to the letter include US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Gregory Meeks, Senate East Asia and Pacific Subcommittee Chairman Edward Markey and senior Senate Foreign Relations Committee member Marco Rubio.

Earlier on Monday, the Biden administration added seven individuals and two entities to its sanctions lists over alleged links to the government of Myanmar. The sanctions and letter come on the eve of the first anniversary of the military coup on February 1.

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US Defense Chief, Qatar's Emir Discuss Continuing Cooperation on Afghanistan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin during a telephone call with the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, discussed their partnership and addressed issues concerning Afghanistan, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said in a statement.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III met today with Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, Amir of Qatar, at the Pentagon to affirm the strength of the US-Qatar defense partnership and its key role in the US strategic bilateral relationship," Kirby said on Monday. "The leaders discussed shared regional security interests, including continued cooperation on Afghanistan."

Earlier in the day, President Joe Biden notified the US Congress of his intention to designate Qatar as a major non-NATO ally.

Austin and the emir also discussed issues related to Iran, Kirby said. Austin thanked the Amir for hosting US forces at Al Udeid Air Base and reaffirmed the United States' commitment on security cooperation with Qatar.

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State Dept. Confirms US Received Russia's Written Follow-Up to Security Proposals (Updates with additional details in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The US has received Russia's written follow-up on the Biden administration's security proposals and will continue to consult allies including Ukraine to address these issues, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"We can confirm we received a written follow-up from Russia. It would be unproductive to negotiate in public, so we'll leave it up to Russia if they want to discuss their response. We remain fully committed to dialogue to address these issues and will continue to consult closely with our Allies and partners, including Ukraine," the spokesperson said on Monday.

Russia's response to the United States proposal comes ahead of the telephone call scheduled for Tuesday between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

On Wednesday, the United States and NATO submitted to Moscow written responses to Russia's proposals on security guarantees.

Lavrov said the following day that the United States response left unanswered the main question about non-expansion of NATO eastward.

Moscow published its security suggestions for NATO and the United States in late 2021 as tensions flared around Ukraine. Moscow specifically requested guarantees that NATO would not expand eastward to include Ukraine and Georgia. The United States insists it will not allow anyone to slam NATO's open door policy shut.

The United States claims Russia wants to invade Ukraine. However, Russia has rejected the accusations, claiming it has a right to move its armed forces within its sovereign territory.

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US Man Charged for Teaching Bomb Making to Person Targeting Authorities - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - North Carolina resident Christopher Arthur has been indicted for teaching how to make improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to a man he knew intended to try and kill law enforcement, the Justice Department said in a press release. "A Duplin County man has been charged in an indictment for teaching another individual how to make and use an explosive, knowing that the individual intended to use that instruction in the attempted murder of federal law enforcement," the release said on Monday.

The Justice Department alleged that at his home in May of last year, Arthur explained how to place and activate IEDs to the person.

And a search of his home uncovered "multiple IEDs, an IED striker plate, an electronic IED trigger and other IED components, a pistol suppressor, bulk gunpowder, and mixed Tannerite explosive."

Law enforcement officials said on May 27, 2020, that law enforcement in New York stopped the man and shot and killed him after a two-hour police pursuit and a shootout. Law enforcement searched his vehicle and found three improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and cell phone records that linked the dead man to Christopher Arthur.

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The perilous situation around Ukraine has worsened over the past several months after Russia was accused by NATO and Ukraine of building up troops near the Ukrainian border and allegedly preparing for an invasion. Russia has consistently denied any plans to invade Ukraine, saying it has the right to move troops inside its territory, responding to what it considers threats to its national security, such as a growing NATO presence in Eastern Europe.

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US Stocks Rebound But January Remains Worst Month for Pricey Stocks Since Pandemic Began

NEW YORK, January 31 (Sputnik) - Wall Street rebounded strongly for a second straight session on Monday but technology and other highly-priced stocks still finished January with their worst losses since the coronavirus outbreak in March of 2020.

The three major US equity indices - the Nasdaq Composite, the S&P 500 and the Dow Jones Industrial Average - rose between 1% and 3%, replicating Friday's rebound that came nearly three weeks of selling. The slump had been triggered by concerns that the US Federal Reserve will be raising interest rates for the first time since the coronavirus pandemic and that many stocks, especially those on Nasdaq, were overvalued.

Nasdaq, which groups mega-capitalized technology names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Nasdaq and Google, rose 3.4% at Monday's close, adding to Friday's 3% gain. It lost 9% for January, marking its largest monthly loss since the COVID-19 outbreak that took 10% off the index in March 2020. At one point last week, the Big Tech index was down almost 20% from its November record high, nearing bear market territory.

The S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks, gained 1.9% on Monday after Friday's rise of 2.4%. It finished January down 5.3%, also for its largest monthly decline since March 2020 when it dropped 12.5%.

The Dow, which groups mostly industrial stocks, rose 1.2% on Monday to add to Friday's rebound of 1.7%. It closed January down 3.3% for its sharpest correction since November, when it lost 3.7%.

The Federal Reserve slashed interest rates to almost zero after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, and kept them there to aid recovery. It also provided more than \$2 trillion of support to the economy, buying at least \$120 billion of bonds and other assets monthly until November last year.

Separately, the federal government spent trillions of dollars more on pandemic relief support in that same duration. All that money, along with higher wage payouts by companies and supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic, has led to runaway inflation.

The Federal Reserve's preferred inflation gauge, the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index, grew by 4.9% year-on-year in December and 5.8% for all of 2021 - marking the highest growth in inflation since 1983.

The US central bank has said between three and four rate hikes may be needed this year to mitigate some of that inflation pressure and even then it would not be near to getting price pressures under control.

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State Dept. Confirms US Received Russia's Written Follow-Up to Security Proposals

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The US has received Russia's written follow-up on the Biden administration's security proposals and will continue to consult allies including Ukraine to address these issues, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"We can confirm we received a written follow-up from Russia. It would be unproductive to negotiate in public, so we'll leave it up to Russia if they want to discuss their response. We remain fully committed to dialogue to address these issues and will continue to consult closely with our Allies and partners, including Ukraine," the spokesperson said on Monday.

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Biden Notifies US Congress of Plans to Designate Qatar as Major Non-NATO Ally

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden issued a letter to Congress notifying the legislature of his intention to designate Qatar as a major non-NATO ally.

"In accordance with section 517 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961... I am providing notice of my intent to designate Qatar as a Major Non-NATO Ally," Biden said in his letter to US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Biden acknowledged Qatar's long-time contribution to the US-led efforts in the Central Command area of responsibility. The US president also noted deep bilateral defense and security cooperation with Qatar.

Earlier on Monday, Biden said in a meeting with Qatar Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani at the White House that this designation will reflect the importance of bilateral partnership.

Biden also welcomed a new deal that Qatar Airways signed earlier on Monday with Boeing for the supply of 34 777-8 wide-body cargo aircraft. This deal will support tens of thousands jobs in the United States, he added.

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Kiev Approves Brink as Biden's Reported Pick for US Ambassador to Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The Ukrainian government approved President Joe Biden's pick for the position of US ambassador to Kiev, CBS News reported, citing two Ukrainian officials.

Kiev approved the selection of Bridget Brink for the diplomatic post, who has served as the US Ambassador to Slovakia since 2019, the report said on Monday.

The approval comes amid heightened tensions between Moscow and Kiev due to the buildup of Russian forces near the border with Ukraine.

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US Estimates 6,600 American Citizens Resided in Ukraine in October - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration estimates that there were some 16,000 US citizens in Ukraine as of October, including approximately 6,600 US citizens living there permanently, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"In October, the estimate was that there were 6,600 US citizens residing in Ukraine," Price said during a press briefing on Monday. "Now our embassy also estimated in October, before Russia's military buildup began, that at any given point in time, there could be 16,000 US citizens, tourists and visitors in Ukraine."

The administration assesses that this number is much lower today, several months later after multiple US government advisories to leave Ukraine amid an alleged threat of Russian aggression, Price added.

Last week, The US embassy in Kiev issued several warnings advising US citizens to leave Ukraine due to the unpredictable security situation and recommended a number of possible destinations.

In recent months, Western countries have accused Russia of a troop buildup near a border with Ukraine with plans to attack its neighbor. Moscow has dismissed the claims, which it considers to be a pretext for NATO military deployment on Russia's borders and plans to expand further eastward.

The tensions escalated since last week, as NATO began deploying additional troops to the Russian-Ukrainian border in anticipation of the alleged invasion. Russia said it deems the move to be a pretext for a provocation and for Kiev's plans to sabotage the Minsk agreements on the resolution of the conflict in the Donbas breakaway region.

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Geopolitics Could Get in Way of Stabilizing Energy Prices - US Treasury Senior Official

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Geopolitics could get in the way of stabilizing energy prices this year, US Assistant Treasury Secretary for Economic Policy Benjamin Harris said. "Currently, it is expected that energy prices will stabilize in 2022, but geopolitical instability could result in higher energy prices," Harris said in a statement on Monday as global oil prices increased 14% in January for the largest monthly gain since last February. Oil markets have rallied without stop over the past six weeks fueled by geopolitical concerns over the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the upcoming meeting of the OPEC+ oil producers alliance which never fails to provide its own drama to keep crude prices on the boil. The Biden administration has approved the sale of 40 million barrels from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve to try and reduce the amount of crude oil that petroleum refiners buy directly from the open market in order to cap prices for both the raw material and fuel sold at pumps. Both crude and US prices of gasoline at the pump are at their highest since 2014. Oil prices began rising in late 2020 from output cuts by producers within OPEC+ working to revive demand decimated by the coronavirus outbreak. Although demand is now back to pre-pandemic levels, OPEC+ has been slow in adding to output, frustrating major energy consumers such as the United States, China and India, who have seen sharp inflation in their economies from high crude prices. The Biden administration announced a coordinated oil reserves release plan with other consuming countries late last year to try and bring energy costs down. OPEC+ will hold its monthly meeting on Wednesday and is expected to announce a marginal production hike that industry analysts said the alliance may have trouble keeping to due to output constraints at under-invested oil fields. Harris acknowledged this, saying: "Members of OPEC+ have fallen behind production targets and the Energy Information Agency expects that domestic production in 2022 will trail pre-pandemic production by roughly 500,000 barrels per day." The Treasury Department official said US energy producers have also been slow to recover the production lost in 2020. The Energy Information Administration said US monthly crude output stood at 11.75 million barrels per day in November, down from a record high of 13.1 million barrels daily in January 2020, before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

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Sherman, Romania's Top Diplomat Agree to Cooperate on Security in Black Sea - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and Romanian Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu during a phone call agreed the two countries will collaborate on Black Sea security issues, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout. "Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman spoke with Romanian Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu today," the readout said on Monday. "The Deputy Secretary praised Romania as a

stalwart NATO Ally and both agreed to collaborate on Black Sea security issues and stand unified against Russian aggression."

The Deputy Secretary and Foreign Minister reiterated both countries' unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the readout said.

Sherman and Foreign Minister Aurescu reaffirmed the importance of the US-Romania Strategic Partnership in addressing common threats and challenges, Price added.

Russia has repeatedly denied US allegations of aggression. Moscow says that it has the right to move troops within its national territory and is not threatening anyone, dismissing the West's allegations to the contrary as a pretext for NATO's increased activity near Russian borders.

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**Additional US Troops That May Deploy to E.Europe Not Part of NATO Response Force-
Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Additional US troops have been placed on high alert to prepare for the possibility of being deployed to Eastern Europe but will not be part of the 8,5000 US troops ready to support the NATO Response Force, Defense Secretary spokesperson John Kirby said.

On Friday, US President Joe Biden said he will be moving US troops to Eastern Europe and to NATO countries in the near future, but specified not many will be deployed.

"When it comes to bilateral agreements or arrangements with NATO allies, if they need additional capabilities, if they would want that, then we would work it out individually with each nation to make sure that we're meeting the need as best they desire and can accommodate," Kirby said during a press briefing on Monday.

Kirby explained that the US troops just placed on high alert in the United States will not be part of the NATO Response Force, but will be available to deploy to any country that has specific security assistance requests.

The United States could also move some US troops already in the European theater into Eastern Europe, Kirby added.

The increase in military assistance to Kiev comes amid increased tensions by US claims that Russia is planning to invade Ukraine.

Moscow has repeatedly dismissed the West's claims, saying it has no plans to attack any country. In addition, Russia has warned that NATO's actions near its borders and plans to expand further eastward represent a national security threat. Moreover, Russia has said it reserves the right to move troops within its own sovereign territory as it sees fit.

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US Does Not See De-Escalation From Russia on Situation Regarding Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United States does not see any signs of de-escalation from Russia of the situation regarding Ukraine, but continues to urge Moscow to make steps in this direction, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"You heard this from Victoria Nuland yesterday that we have consistently called for de-escalation, for genuine indications of de-escalation [in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict], and we have, broadly speaking, not seen that," Price said during a press briefing on Monday. Price added that he is not familiar with any reports published over the weekend that claimed several thousand Russian troops returned to their permanent bases.

The United States and its allies have accused Russia of amassing troops near the border with Ukraine and planning to invade the country. Russia has dismissed the claims, saying it does not plan to attack any country but reserves the right to move troops on its sovereign territory as it sees fit. Moreover, Moscow has said NATO's activities and plans to move eastward including in Ukraine, represents a threat to Russia's national security and will not be tolerated.

The tensions escalated since last week, as NATO began deploying additional troops to the Russian-Ukrainian border in anticipation of the alleged invasion, which Moscow deems to be a pretext for a provocation and Kiev's plans to sabotage the Minsk agreements on the resolution of the conflict in the Donbas breakaway region.

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New York Prosecutor Won't Charge ex- Governor Cuomo for Harassment - Statement
NEW YORK, January 31 (Sputnik) - A New York county district attorney has decided not to criminally charge former state governor Andrew Cuomo for sexual misconduct due to a lack of evidence in a case brought against him by a woman, a statement from the prosecutor's office said.

"After a thorough review of the available evidence and applicable law, the Oswego County District Attorney's office has concluded that there is not a sufficient legal basis to bring criminal charges against former Governor Andrew Cuomo based on allegations made by Virginia Limmiatis," said the statement on Monday.

Cuomo, who was governor for more than a decade, resigned in August after allegations of misconduct brought against him by multiple women, including those who once worked alongside or directly under him.

The New York State Assembly Judiciary Committee, in an investigation report released in November, found that he repeatedly engaged in sexual harassment of his female staff.

Limmiatis, an energy company worker in New York, told investigators that Cuomo touched her chest during a May 2017 conservation event in Oswego County, New York.

The county's District Attorney Gregory Oakes made clear in the statement issued Monday that it was not doubting Limmiatis' story.

"In no way should this decision be interpreted as casting doubt upon the character or credibility of Ms. Limmiatis, or how harmful the acts she experienced were," Oakes was quoted saying in the statement. "This investigation makes clear what victims, their advocates, police, and

prosecutors have said for years: The current sex offense statutes in New York fail to properly hold offenders accountable and fail to adequately protect victims."

The fate of the other accusations against Cuomo was not immediately known.

Aside from its probe on Cuomo's alleged sexual misdeeds, the New York State Assembly Judiciary Committee also found that the former governor had used state resources to support a multi-million dollar book project and was not transparent about nursing home COVID deaths on his watch

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US to Announce New Ambassador to Ukraine 'Shortly' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will announce the nomination of next US ambassador to Ukraine in the very near future, US State Department spokesperson New Price said.

Earlier on Monday, administration sources told CNN that President Joe Biden has chosen current US Ambassador to Slovakia, Bridget Brink, to be the country's new ambassador to Ukraine. Biden has not yet nominated Brink given that the administration is waiting on the formal approval from the Ukrainian government.

"I am not in the position to confirm that. As you know, the nominations are emanated from the White house, but the Secretary [of State Anthony Blinken] was asked about it when he was in Kiev the other day and he noted that we expect the nomination to be forthcoming shortly," Price told reporters during a press briefing on Monday.

The position of US ambassador to Ukraine has been vacant since the departure of the previous envoy, Marie Yovanovitch, in May of 2019.

Yovanovitch was removed from her post by former President Donald Trump. The dismissal came at a time when Trump's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, was investigating the then-Democratic presidential candidate Biden and his son Hunter Biden over their alleged corrupt practices in Ukraine during the Obama administration.

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US Judge Shuts Down Plea Agreement of Ahmaud Arbery Killer Travis McMichael - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - US District Judge Lisa Wood rejected a plea agreement of Ahmaud Arbery killer Travis McMichael that would have gotten him a 30-year federal prison sentence for hate-crime charges connected to Arbery's murder, the New York Times said in a report.

The plea agreement faced objections from Arbery's family, including his mother, who asked the judge not to grant McMichael – one of three men convicted of killing her son – the deal.

"I'm asking on the behalf of his family, on behalf of his memory and on behalf of fairness that you do not grant this plea in order to allow these men to transfer out of Georgia state custody into the federal prisons where they prefer to be," Wanda Cooper-Jones, Arbery's mother reportedly said to the court on Monday.

Travis McMichael, his father Gregory McMichael and associate William Bryan were convicted on charges including murder, aggravated assault and false imprisonment for shooting and killing Arbery in February 2020. The McMichaels received life sentences without the possibility of parole, while Bryan received life with the possibility of parole.

The plea agreement would have enabled Travs McMichael to spend 30 years of his sentence in federal prison, where conditions are generally better than state prisons, the report said. The court has yet to decide whether to accept a similar plea agreement from Gregory McMichael.

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US, French Top Navy Chiefs Discuss Interoperability, Expanded Ties - Navy News Service

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The operational heads of the US and French navies met at the Pentagon and discussed expanded cooperation and interoperability, the Navy News Service (NNS) reported in a press release.

" US Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Mike Gilday met with his counterpart Chief of the French Navy Admiral Pierre Vandier at the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia [on] January 31," the release said. "The two leaders discussed mutual strengths, the importance of the NATO Alliance, and how to advance interoperability."

Current global challenges underscored the importance of strong partnerships and the US Navy's partnership with the French Navy was rooted in common values and helped the United States to take on the challenges of the 21st century, Gilday stated.

Vandier said the geopolitical context for US-French naval cooperation was "shaped by the competition for global commons. Our navies act at the intersection of sea, cyberspace and space. ...The French Navy intends to keep working hard to maintain the best interoperability with its US ally."

In 2021, the Charles de Gaulle served as the Commander, Combined Task Force 50 in the 5th Fleet area of operations and conducted dual carrier operations with the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group (IKE CSG) in the Arabian Sea and senior French and US officials signed a Strategic Interoperability Framework, the release noted.

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Russia to Convene UNSC Session on Sanctions During Presidency Over Council in February

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - Russia during its presidency over the UN Security Council this month will hold a meeting on the negative impact of sanctions on the humanitarian situation on February 7, the Russian mission to the United Nations said in a statement.

"The Russian Federation begins to exercise the functions of the President of the UN Security Council in February," the mission said on Monday. "The mission plans to hold a discussion on February 7 on the issue of sanctions and, particularly, on the prevention of the negative and undesirable consequences of the Security Council sanctions on the socio-humanitarian situation and the provision of aid."

The mission said it will also hold another central meeting on the cooperation between the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the United Nations.

"We consider it important to inform the members of the Security Council about the collective actions of the CSTO to stabilize the situation in Kazakhstan," the mission said.

On February 17, the mission said, it will hold a meeting to address the implementation of the Minsk agreements aimed to resolve the conflict in Ukraine.

The presidency of the UN Security Council rotates every month alphabetically among all of the 15 members of the UN Security Council.

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Trudeau Govt. Proposes \$2.5Bln Boost to Provide Rapid COVID-19 Tests - Health Canada
WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has introduced new legislation to provide \$2.5 billion in additional funding to ensure rapid COVID-19 tests are available to residents, Canada Health, the country's federal health service, announced. "Today, ...Jean-Yves Duclos, Minister of Health, introduced Bill C-10 - An Act respecting certain measures related to COVID-19 in Parliament to provide Health Canada with the statutory authority to purchase and distribute across the country up to \$2.5 billion worth of COVID-19 rapid tests," Canada Health said in a press release on Monday.

With this funding, the government will put in place critical contracts in a highly competitive global market, to purchase sufficient quantities of rapid tests to meet the continued demand across the country, the release said.

"This Bill will allow Health Canada to buy the necessary rapid tests so that jurisdictions across the country can identify cases early, break the chain of transmissions, and reduce outbreaks," he release added.

The bill will allow Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada to continue supporting provinces and territories by securing the COVID-19 rapid tests they need and continue to partner with the Canadian Red Cross to deliver rapid tests free of charge to community organizations, according to the release.

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No Indication US Will Talk Directly With Iran When JCPOA Negotiations Resume - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - There is no indication that the United States will negotiate directly with Iran instead of via proxies when negotiations about returning to mutual compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) resume, a senior State Department official said.

"We have not met directly yet, we have no indication that's going to be the case when we reconvene," the official said on Monday. "These are complicated negotiations with room for a lot of misunderstanding, a lot of misinterpretation and miscommunication, and we think it would be facilitated by direct talks and accelerated by direct talks."

However, there is no guarantee that direct talks would result in the parties reaching an agreement to return to compliance with the nuclear deal, the official added.

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US Delivering More Shipments of \$200Mln Security Package for Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United States will deliver additional shipments as part of the \$200 million security package for Ukraine in the coming days, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

"There will be more coming in the coming days," Kirby said during a press briefing on Monday regarding US shipments of security assistance provided to Ukraine.

President Joe Biden approved a new \$200 million security package for Ukraine in December, which includes Javelin anti-tank missiles.

The increase in military assistance to Kiev comes amid increased tensions over Ukraine and claims by the United States and its European allies that Russia is planning to invade Ukraine. Moscow has repeatedly dismissed the claims, saying it has no plans to attack any country. In addition, Russia has warned that NATO's actions near its borders represent a national security threat and it reserves the right to move troops within its own sovereign territory.

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Blinken Tells Palestine President Abbas US Still Backs 2-State-Solution - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration remains committed to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in a telephone conversation, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout on the conversation.

"Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas today," the readout said on Monday. "Secretary Blinken... reaffirmed the US administration's commitment to a two-state solution."

Blinken and Abbas discussed the importance of strengthening the US relationship with the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people, as well as the need to improve quality of life for Palestinians in tangible ways, the readout said.

"They also discussed the challenges facing the Palestinian Authority and the need for reform," the readout added.

Blinken reiterated that Israelis and Palestinians alike deserve to live safely and securely, and enjoy equal measures of security, freedom and prosperity, according to the readout.

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Iran to Reach 'Breakout Point' of Nuclear Enrichment Within Weeks - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Iran will reach the "breakout" point of nuclear enrichment within weeks, not months, as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) talks remain stalled, a senior US State Department official said during a press briefing.

"I think it is fair to say that when it comes to their [Iran's] capacity to have enough material, in which weapons grade for [a] bomb, we are talking about weeks, not months. That's different from the timeline for weaponization, for having a bomb, but we are very focused on the JCPOA, on ensuring that they don't reach that threshold in terms of breakout timeline on the enrichment side," the official said on Monday.

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Only 'Handful' of Weeks Left Before Return to JCPOA Impossible - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The Iran nuclear talks, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has only a "handful" of weeks left before the return to the agreement will be impossible, a senior US State Department official said during a press briefing.

"We are in the final stretch because as we've said now for some time this [talks] can't go on forever because of Iran's nuclear advances," the official said on Monday. "We only have a handful of weeks left to get a deal, after which point it will unfortunately be no longer possible to return to the JCPOA."

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UNSC Unanimously Adopts Resolution to Extend UN Mission in Libya Until April 30

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Monday unanimously adopted a resolution to extend the mandate of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) until April 30.

"The Security Council decides to extend until 30 April 2022 the mandate of the UNSMIL, as an integrated special political mission to carry out its mandate," the resolution said.

In the fall of 2020, the UNSMIL brokered inclusive political consultations among Libyan political rivals, which resulted in the creation of the Joint Military Commission, a mechanism with an equal representation of rival forces brought together to negotiate a lasting peace deal.

Libya de facto ceased to be a united country in 2011, when its leader Muammar Gaddafi was ousted and assassinated. Last March, a transition government was voted in at a UN-backed gathering of Libyan delegates in Geneva in the hope that it would lead the North African nation into a general election on December 24, but the polls were delayed after the eligibility of some of 98 candidates was questioned.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) -

RUSSIA'S SECURITY GUARANTEES PROPOSALS

* The United States and its allies are ready to engage with Russia in good faith if the latter is sincere about addressing their security concerns, President Joe Biden said on Monday following a UN Security Council meeting on the Ukraine crisis.

* The United States is offering Russia an opportunity to discuss its security concerns in Europe, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said.

* The United States is expecting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to convey Kremlin's reaction to Washington's responses to Moscow's security proposals during upcoming talks with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, US State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

US SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* Assets of Russian companies in the United Kingdom may be frozen in accordance with a new bill on anti-Moscow sanctions, UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said on Monday.

* The United States has developed specific sanctions package for the Russian elites and the members of their families in case Russia attacks Ukraine, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

UN SECURITY COUNCIL MEETING

* Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday he can rule out Russian invasion into Ukraine but cannot exclude a possibility of provocation from Ukraine.

* Belarus is ready to assist every effort to resolve the Ukraine crisis, the country's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Valentin Rybakov said.

* Ukraine backs maintaining open diplomatic channels with and Russia and stands ready for direct contacts at the highest level, the country's new Ambassador to the United Nations Sergiy Kyslytsya said.

* US ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said that Russia intends to have over 30,000 troops deployed near the Belarus-Ukraine border by early February.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron discussed the situation concerning Ukraine and Russia's proposals on security guarantees during a phone conversation on Monday, the Kremlin said.

* The United Kingdom is committed to dialogue if Russia is genuinely interested in finding a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Ukraine, UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations James Kariuki said on Monday.

* Ukraine is ready for constructive negotiations with Russia, but it will not make concessions, now it's up to Moscow, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said.

* Poland decided to provide Ukraine with defensive weapons, Pawel Soloch, the head of the Polish National Security Bureau, told reporters.

* US media are publishing deliberately false information about Ukraine, this is already becoming obvious to everyone, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, commenting on media reports that the White House is allegedly dissatisfied with the position of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the threat of Russia's alleged invasion.

JOHNSON SCANDAL IN UK

* UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Monday refused calls to resign after an investigation into a string of parties held at his official residence in Downing Street during the COVID-19 lockdown found there were serious "failures of leadership and judgment."

* An internal investigation into alleged parties held at UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's official residence and other government premises during the COVID-19 lockdown released found serious "failures of leadership and judgment" by the government.

* Johnson refused calls to resign after an investigation into a string of parties held at his official residence in Downing Street during the COVID-19 lockdown found there were serious "failures of leadership and judgment."

RUSSIA-BELARUS MILITARY DRILLS

* The military exercises conducted by Russia and Belarus are entirely defensive in nature and do not pose a threat to the neighboring countries or anyone else, Belarus Ambassador to the United Nations Valentyn Rybakov said on Monday.

* There are risks in joint Russia-Belarus military drills amid the situation in Ukraine, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

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US Defense Chief 'Very Concerned' N. Korea Advancing Ballistic Missile Program - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin is very concerned about North Korea's recent progress in its ballistic missile program, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Monday.

"No matter how well or how poorly these launches go, he [Kim Jong Un] learns from them and he's able to continue to advance his program, so... yes, the Secretary is very concerned about their advancing ballistic missile program," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby said the US Department of Defense hopes the North Korean leader stops the ballistic missile launches.

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US Expects Lavrov to Convey Kremlin's Reaction to US Response During Call With Blinken
WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) – The United States is expecting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to convey Kremlin's reaction to Washington's responses to Moscow's security proposals during upcoming talks with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Monday.

The two will have a phone call on Tuesday.

"We will have to see what the foreign minister [Lavrov] has to say in terms of conveying the official position, or any initial reactions from the Kremlin to our written response. But that's precisely why the Secretary is engaging in this conversation - to hear initial reactions," Price said during a press briefing.

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Pentagon Says US Troops on High Alert Over Ukraine Have Not Received Deployment Orders

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said in a press briefing on Monday that the 8,500 US forces that have been put on heightened alert have not received any deployment orders.

"They have not been given deployment orders," Kirby said. "They've just been told to be ready on a shorter period of time in case the alliance activates that."

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Biden Says Notifying Congress of Plans to Designate Qatar as Major Non-NATO Ally

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Monday that he is notifying Congress about his plans to designate Qatar as a major non-NATO ally.

"I am notifying Congress that I will designate Qatar as a major non-NATO ally to reflect the importance of our relationship," Biden told reporters during his meeting with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani.

Biden also welcomed a deal that Qatar Airways signed earlier on Monday with Boeing for the supply of 34 777-8 wide-body cargo aircraft. This deal will support tens of thousands jobs in the US, he added.

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White House Expects China to Ensure Safety of US Athletes During Winter Games

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United States expects that China will ensure the safety of American athletes during the upcoming Winter Olympics despite Washington's diplomatic boycott, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"We expect the PRC to ensure the safety and well-being of our athletes," Psaki told a briefing.

"They [athletes] have our full support, we are 100% behind them."

In December, the United States announced it would not send any diplomatic or official representation to the Beijing Games due to alleged human rights violations by China. The move has been supported by several allies, including the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. Athletes from these countries will still compete in the event.

China dismissed the move as an attempt to politicize sports.

Beijing will host the 2022 Games from February 4-20. The Paralympics will take place from March 4-13.

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Biden Says Had 'Productive' Call With Zelenskyy, Continues to Engage in Diplomacy

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Monday that he had a productive call with his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, last week and continues to engage in "non-stop diplomacy."

"I had a productive talk last week with President Zelenskyy, and we continue engage in non-stop diplomacy," Biden told reporters at the White House.

CNN reported, citing a senior Ukrainian official, that the talks between the two "did not go well" due to differences over the risks levels of an alleged "Russian invasion." Biden purportedly told Zelenskyy that an invasion of Ukraine may be imminent, while the latter questioned the assessment. White House National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne dismissed the reports as false.

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US Military Responded to Missile Attack on United Arab Emirates - White House

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - US forces helped respond to a missile attack against the United Arab Emirates (UAE) using Patriot surface-to-air interceptor missiles, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"US military personnel responded to an inbound missile threat on the UAE. This involved the deployment of Patriot interceptors," Psaki said during a press briefing.

The UAE Defense Ministry said that early on Monday they intercepted a ballistic missile launched by the Ansar Allah (Houthi) movement from Yemen. The attack did not result in any losses, the ministry said.

This was the third Houthi attack against the UAE since the start of January. Last Monday, the UAE air defense intercepted and destroyed two ballistic missiles launched by the Houthis, the remains of which fell in the Abu Dhabi area.

Earlier in January, several Houthi drones also targeted the UAE capital, including the construction site of a new airport and fuel tankers near depots of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, killing three people and injuring six others.

The Houthi rebels say their attacks are a response to the UAE's involvement in hostilities against the movement in Yemen.

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White House Says Working 'Very Closely' With US Lawmakers on Ukraine-Russia Issue

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is working closely with Congress on efforts to respond to the ongoing situation between Ukraine and Russia, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"We are working very closely with Congress on Ukraine and Russia and the tensions we're seeing build up at the border," Psaki said during a press briefing. "We are in these conversations with Congress and we look forward to continuing them."

Psaki said the White House is encouraged by the fact that there are bipartisan discussions about how to hold Russia accountable and achieve a deterrent impact.

US lawmakers and committee staff last week received classified briefings about the developments in the situation between Ukraine and Russia. Congress has been discussing the possibility of new imposing new sanctions on Russia and providing additional support for Ukraine.

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US Developed Sanctions for Russian Elite, Family Members if Russia Invades Ukraine - Psaki (Updates with additional, background info in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United States has developed specific sanctions package for the Russian elites and the members of their families in case Russia attacks Ukraine, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"I can confirm we have developed specific sanctions packages for both, Russian elites and their family members if Russia further invades Ukraine," Psaki said during a press briefing. "These efforts are being pursued in coordination with allies and partners."

Psaki noted that the persons the US administration has identified "are in or near the inner circles of the Kremlin and play a role in government decision making or are at a minimum complicit in the Kremlin's destabilizing behaviour."

"Many of these individuals are particularly vulnerable targets because of their deep financial ties with the West," she added.

On Sunday, UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said that London is not ruling out the possibility of seizing the British property of Russian "oligarchs" as part of tighter sanctions against Moscow in the event of escalation in Ukraine. When asked if it will affect British investors, Truss noted that "freedom and democracy" are "more important than immediate financial issues."

In a comment on Monday, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova reminded her of a list of former corrupt officials whom Russia has long asked to extradite.

Russia has repeatedly denied preparing an invasion of Ukraine. Moscow says that it has the right to move troops within its national territory and is not threatening anyone, dismissing the West's allegations to the contrary as a pretext for NATO's increased activity near Russian borders.

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Fed Would Not Want to Hike Rates Fast to Avoid Hurting US Economy - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The US central bank should not want to increase interest rates so quickly as to hurt the US economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco President Mary Daly said on Monday.

"You don't want to raise rates so quickly that it stifles growth," Daly said. "Inflation is too high... [but] striking a balance is the right thing to do. If the economy grows as expected, it will be able to stand on."

Daly's comments came after hawkish interest rate hike projections made by various Federal Reserve officials and Wall Street economists in recent days, following central bank Chair Jerome Powell's remarks last week that the era of cheap easy money in the United States had to end in order to bring inflation under control.

On Friday, Goldman Sachs economists said there could be as many as five interest rate hikes this year, instead of the three to four expected by the markets. Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta President Raphael Bostic suggested during the weekend that some rate increases could be as large as a half percentage point, versus max forecasts for a quarter-percentage point rise each time.

The Federal Reserve slashed interest rates to almost zero after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March of 2020 and kept them there to aid economic recovery. The central bank also provided more than \$2 trillion of support to the US economy, buying at least \$120 billion of bonds and other assets monthly until last November.

Separately, the US federal government spent trillions of dollars on pandemic relief support in that time period. All the money created, along with higher wage payouts by companies and supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic, has led to runaway inflation.

The Federal Reserve's preferred inflation gauge, the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index, expanded by 4.9% year-on-year in December and by 5.8% for all of 2021 - the highest in 39 years. The central bank's own tolerance for inflation is just 2% per year.

"If the Fed gets to 1.25% by the end of the year, that's a lot of tightening, but it's still helping the economy," Daly said, referring to what she believed would cumulative increase in the interest rates.

The Federal Reserve is mandated to achieve "maximum employment," defined by a jobless rate of 4% or below. The central bank has been more successful with this goal, reducing the US jobless rate to 3.9% by December from a record high of 14.8% in April 2020.

Even so, Daly said the Federal Reserve did not want to "declare victory on full employment too soon," adding that there were still four million Americans on jobless lines.

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White House Says Working With Interagency Partners on Black College Bomb Threats

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The White House is working with US federal government partners to address bomb threats at six historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"These are certainly disturbing, and the White House is in touch with the interagency partners, including federal law enforcement leadership on this," Psaki said during a press briefing.

The White House is relieved to hear that Howard and Bethune-Cookman universities have been given the all-clear, Psaki said. Biden is aware of the reports and the White House will continue to monitor the situation, Psaki added.

Six HBCUs received bomb threats on Monday morning, prompting law enforcement investigations and campus disruptions. Three of the schools were also the target of bomb threats earlier in January.

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Qatar Airways, Boeing Ink Historic Deal for 34 Wide-Body 777-8 Freighter Aircraft

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Qatar Airways on Monday signed an agreement with Boeing for the supply of 34 777-8 wide-body cargo aircraft with an option for 16 more in the future, the air carrier company said on Monday.

"Boeing today launched the new 777-8 Freighter and expanded its market-leading 777X and freighter families of jetliners with an order for up to 50 aircraft from one of the world's largest cargo carriers, Qatar Airways," Qatar Airways said in a statement. "Qatar Airways will be the 777-8 Freighter launch customer with a firm order for 34 jets and options for 16 more, a total purchase that would be worth more than \$20 billion at current list prices and the largest freighter commitment in Boeing history by value."

Qatar Airways and Boeing have also signed a Memorandum of Understanding for a firm order of 25 Boeing 737-10 aircraft and purchase rights for 25 additional aircraft of this type, the statement said. The total value of the Qatar Airways commitment for Boeing 737 Max aircraft is \$7 billion.

The agreement was signed in the White House in the presence of US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, Ambassador Sheikh Mishaal bin Hamad Al Thani, Director of the White House National Economic Council Brian Deese, and Boeing President and CEO Dave Calhoun, according to the release.

The deliveries of 777-8 freighters will commence in 2027, the release said.

Earlier in January, Qatar Airways announced the start of legal proceedings against Airbus in the Technology & Construction division of the High Court in England over defects found on the surface of its Airbus A350 fleet, which resulted in 21 aircraft being grounded. Moreover, Qatar Airways refused to accept delivery of further Airbus aircraft. Airbus responded by initializing a procedure to cancel the entire contract for the delivery of 50 A321 Neo aircraft.

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US Developed Sanctions for Russian Elites, Family Members if Russia Invades Ukraine- Psaki

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RECAST - IMF, World Bank to Meet in 2022 in Washington Instead of Marrakesh Due to COVID-19

(Recasts to say 'in the Moroccan city' in the lede)

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund and World Bank Group will hold their joint annual meetings this year in Washington instead of Marrakesh due to continued uncertainties over COVID-19, although the 2023 events will be held in the Moroccan city, the IMF said on Monday.

"[The World Bank Group and the IMF] today announced, in consultation with the Kingdom of Morocco, that the planned World Bank Group-IMF Annual Meetings that were scheduled to take place in Marrakesh, Morocco, in October 2022 will now take place in Washington D.C. due to continuing uncertainty over the COVID-19 pandemic," the statement said. "The October 2023 Annual Meetings will be held in Marrakesh."

The IMF-World Bank annual meetings are usually held for two consecutive years at the World Bank Group and IMF headquarters in Washington, and every third year in another member country.

The annual meetings gather central bank governors, finance ministers, as well as private sector executives and civil society leaders to discuss issues of global concern, such as inclusive economic growth, financial stability, job creation, climate change, and fight against poverty.

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US FDA Approves Moderna's Covid Vaccine SPIKEVAX - Company

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has fully approved Moderna's SPIKEVAX, which can now be administered to people 18 and older to prevent COVID-19, the company announced Monday.

"Moderna... today announced the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved the Biologics License Application (BLA) for SPIKEVAX (COVID-19 Vaccine, mRNA) to prevent COVID-19 in individuals 18 years of age and older," the company said in a press release.

Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel in the same release said the full licensure of Spikevax is a momentous milestone because it is the company's first product to achieve licensure in the US. The FDA, according to the release, based its decision on the totality of scientific evidence shared by the company in its submission package, including follow-up data from the Phase 3 COVE study that showed high efficacy and favorable safety around six months after the second dose.

SPIKEVAX, the company added, has received approval by regulators in more than 70 countries, including Canada, Japan, the European Union, the United Kingdom and Israel.

The company said it shipped 807 million doses of its COVID-19 vaccine worldwide in 2021, with about 25 percent of those doses shipped to low- and middle-income countries.

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US Moves Issue of Settling Ukraine Crisis Away From Minsk Agreements - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United States is moving the topic of resolving the situation in Ukraine away from the Minsk agreements, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine on Monday. Nebenzia pointed out that US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield did not mention the Minsk agreements in the remarks she delivered to the UN Security Council earlier.

"That is very indicative," Nebenzia said. "This is the context that we need to use when we're talking about the Ukrainian crisis. The United States is looking at this from a completely different angle."

Nebenzia also said on February 17, Russia will hold a meeting on the implementation of the Minsk agreements. Russia will preside with the UN Security Council during the month of February.

The Russian government has expressed concerns over NATO's military activity near its borders and over the alliance's plans to further expand eastward, including in Ukraine. Russian officials have also expressed concern about the United States' and its allies' military support for Ukraine, including the increase in the number of instructors near the breakaway Donbas region.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Moscow does not exclude that the "hysteria" around Ukraine fueled by the West is aimed at covering Kiev's plans to sabotage the Minsk agreements on the peace process in the Donbas.

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Nebenzia Asks US to Back Up Claims of 100,000 Russian Troops at Ukrainian Border
UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - The Russian ambassador to the United Nations asked the United States on Monday to back up their claims of 100,000 Russian troops being at the border with Ukraine.

"Since our American colleagues convened us today, let them show us any evidence, apart from bogus narratives, that Russia is intending to attack Ukraine," Vassily Nebenzia told a UN Security Council meeting.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield in her remarks to the council said Russia has assembled a military force of more than 100,000 troops along Ukraine's borders, posing a threat to international peace and security.

"Incidentally, I'd like to put a question not only to our US colleagues – where did you get the figure of 100,000 troops that are deployed, as you state, on the Russian-Ukrainian border, although that is not the case? We have never cited that figure. We've never confirmed that figure," Nebenzia stated.

Nebenzia pointed out that the United States and other Western nations are "actively pumping" Ukraine with ammunition and weapons in violation of the Minsk agreements.

"The weapons that it would readily use against civilians in the east of its own country," he said. Tensions around Ukraine have flared over the past several months after Russia was accused of building up troops near the Ukrainian border and allegedly preparing for an invasion. Moscow has dismissed the accusations, pointing to NATO's military activity near Russian borders, which it deems a threat to its national security.

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Russia-Belarus Drills Purely Defensive in Nature, Pose No Threat - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) -The military exercises conducted by Russia and Belarus are entirely defensive in nature and do not pose a threat to the neighboring countries or anyone else, Belarus Ambassador to the United Nations Valentyn Rybakov said on Monday. "[These military exercises] are always purely defensive in nature and they pose no threat either for our European partners, or our neighboring countries," Rybakov told a UN Security Council meeting.

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Belarus Ready to Assist Every Effort to Resolve Ukraine Crisis - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - Belarus is ready to assist every effort to resolve the Ukraine crisis, the country's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Valentin Rybakov said on Monday.

"Our country is still prepared to do everything possible to restore dialogue and mutual understanding in the region. There is no alternative to the Minsk agreements playing a key role in peaceful settlement of the crisis," he said.

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Ukraine Supports Keeping Open Diplomatic Channels With Russia - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - Ukraine backs maintaining open diplomatic channels with and Russia and stands ready for direct contacts at the highest level, the country's new Ambassador to the United Nations Sergiy Kyslytsya said on Monday.

"At the same time, we support to keep diplomatic channels with Russia open. My president [Volodymyr Zelenskyy] said that he is ready to meet his Russian counterpart [Vladimir Putin]," Kyslytsya told a UN Security Council meeting.

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Russian Envoy to UN Says Can Rule Out Russian Invasion Into Ukraine

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday he can rule out Russian invasion into Ukraine but cannot exclude a possibility of provocation from Ukraine.

"I can rule that out," Nebenzia said when asked if there were any circumstances in which Russian troops would cross the border into Ukraine. "We do not exclude provocation from Ukrainian side. The separatist republics say they have information that such provocations may happen."

He added that any attempts to resolve the conflict by military means are totally unacceptable.

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Ukraine Sees No Alternative to Peaceful Resolution of Donbas Conflict - Envoy to UN
UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - Ukraine sees no alternative to peaceful resolution of the conflict in Donbas, Sergiy Kyslytsya, the country's permanent representative to the United Nations, said on Monday.

"Ukraine sees no alternative to peaceful resolution of the ongoing conflict," he told the UN Security Council.

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US State Dept. Confirms Blinken, Lavrov to Have Phone Call Tuesday

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has confirmed that Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will hold a phone call on Tuesday.

"We expect the Secretary will have an opportunity to speak by phone with Foreign Minister Lavrov tomorrow morning," the department's spokesperson said, as quoted by ABC News. The Russian Foreign Ministry said earlier in the day that the two will have a telephone conversation on February 1, and no face-to-face meeting is so far being planned.

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US Appoints Tracey Ann Jacobson as Interim Chargé d'Affaires in Ethiopia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has appointed Ambassador Tracey Ann Jacobson to be interim Chargé d'Affaires at the US Embassy in Ethiopia, the State Department said in a press release on Monday.

"Ambassador Jacobson will lead US engagement in Ethiopia," the release said. "The Secretary of State selected Ambassador Jacobson to continue the work undertaken by Ambassador [Geeta] Pasi to press for an immediate cessation of hostilities, an end to ongoing human rights

abuses and violations, unhindered humanitarian access, and a negotiated resolution to the conflict in Ethiopia."

Jacobson is a career diplomat who has served as US ambassador to Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kosovo. She also served as the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs in 2017 as well as director of the State Department's Afghanistan Task Force last year.

Pasi has informed the State Department of her decision to retire and pursue other opportunities, the release said.

The State Department praised Pasi for her handling of the US embassy in Ethiopia during an exceptionally complex period.

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Nebenzia Says UNSC to Hold Meeting on Implementation of Minsk Agreements February 17

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will hold a meeting on the implementation of the Minsk agreements on February 17 and Ukraine can also be discussed then, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday.

"On the 17th of February, we're planning to hold a meeting on the implementation of Minsk agreements when we can talk about Ukraine," Nebenzia told the UN Security Council.

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Only 17% of Americans Satisfied With Direction of Country - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) – While a whopping 85% of Americans are satisfied with how things are going in their lives, only 17% are happy about the direction their country is moving in, according to a new Gallup poll out on Monday.

"Amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and record-high inflation, Americans' satisfaction with the direction of the country has fallen to 17%, the lowest in a year. At the same time, Americans' satisfaction with their own lives has ticked up to 85%, just five points shy of the 2020 record-high point," the poll said.

The low level of satisfaction with the country's direction coincides with the low job approval rating of US President Joe Biden, it added.

The level of life satisfaction largely depends on education degree, annual household income and religious service attendance, the survey showed. "Majorities of Americans who attend religious services weekly (67%), have household incomes of \$40,000 to \$99,999 (52%) or \$100,000 or more (61%), or earned college degrees (54%) are very satisfied with their own lives," it said.

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Russia Not Refusing to Discuss Situation in Ukraine - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - Russia is not refusing to discuss the situation in Ukraine, but it does not understand the rationale behind a UN Security Council meeting on the issue requested by the US, Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday.

"Russia is not refusing to discuss the situation in Ukraine, we are not understanding why are we here today," he told the UNSC meeting.

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US Authorities Investigate Bomb Threats at 6 Historically Black Colleges - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Six historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have received bomb threats that disrupted operations and prompted law enforcement to launch investigations, CNN reported on Monday.

The schools, including Howard University and Bowie State University, received bomb threats on Monday morning, the report said, citing campus spokespeople and social media statements. Howard University in Washington, DC was cleared by police officers, who found no hazardous materials on the site, the report quoted a Washington Metropolitan Police Department spokesperson as saying.

Three of the schools, again including Howard University, were also the target of bomb threats earlier in January, the report added.

The five other schools that received bomb threats on Monday morning are continuing to investigate while students are kept either on lockdown or shelter in place, according to the report.

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China's UN Envoy Says Russian Troops Near Ukraine Border Not a Threat

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - China does not view the presence of Russian troops near the border with Ukraine as a threat to international peace and security, Permanent Representative to the United Nations Zhang Jun said on Monday.

"China opposes the Security Council's holding of this open meeting as requested by the United States. The Permanent Representative of the US to the UN ... claimed that the reason why the

US was asking the council to hold this open meeting was that Russia's deployment of troops along the Ukrainian border posed a threat to international peace and security. China can not align itself with this point," Zhang told the UN Security Council meeting, "The expansion of NATO is a problem difficult to circumvent," Zhang added.

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Biden Says US, Allies to Engage in 'Good Faith' If Russia Sincere About Talks on Security

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies are ready to engage with Russia in good faith if the latter is sincere about addressing their security concerns, President Joe Biden said on Monday following a UN Security Council presentation on the Ukraine crisis by the US.

"If Russia is sincere about addressing our respective security concerns through dialogue, the United States and our Allies and partners will continue to engage in good faith," Biden said in a statement.

The UN Security Council meeting was a critical step toward rallying the world to speak out in one voice against the use of force and call for de-escalation and diplomacy, Biden added.

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US Concludes \$840,000 Settlement of Alleged Arms Export Violations - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The US government has approved an \$840,000 settlement of alleged export violations by Torrey Pines Logic and Leonid Volfson, State Department spokesperson Ned Price announced on Monday.

"The US Department of State has concluded an administrative settlement with Torrey Pines Logic (TPL) of San Diego, California and Leonid Volfson to resolve alleged violations of the Arms Export Control Act (AECA) and the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR)," Price said in a media note.

The State Department, TPL and Volfson reached the settlement following an extensive compliance review by the Office of Defense Trade Controls Compliance in the Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, the note said.

"This agreement pursuant to ITAR resolves alleged ITAR violations involving the attempted unauthorized export of defense articles; the unauthorized export of defense articles to various countries, including the People's Republic of China and Lebanon, which are proscribed destinations under ITAR and Russia," the note added.

Under the terms of the 36-month Consent Agreement, TPL and Volfson will pay a civil penalty of \$840,000 and the State Department agreed to suspend \$420,000 of the sum on condition that

the funds would be used for measures to strengthen TPL's compliance program, according to the note.

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UK Says Committed to Dialogue if Russia Genuine About Finding Solution to Ukraine Crisis

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United Kingdom is committed to dialogue if Russia is genuinely interested in finding a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Ukraine, UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations James Kariuki said on Monday.

"We are ready to address security concerns [with Russia]," Kariuki said during a UN Security Council meeting. "We are committed to dialogue if Russia is genuine in finding a diplomatic solution."

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US Claims Russia to Have Over 30,000 Troops Near Belarus-Ukraine Border by Early February

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - US ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said on Monday that Russia intends to have over 30,000 troops deployed near the Belarus-Ukraine border by early February.

"Russia has also moved nearly 5,000 troops into Belarus with short range ballistic missiles, special forces and anti aircraft batteries. We've seen evidence that Russia intends to expand that presence to more than 30,000 troops near the Belarus-Ukraine border, less than two hours north of Kiev, by early February," Thomas-Greenfield said in a UN Security Council meeting.

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US Offering Russia Opportunity to Discuss Security Concerns in Europe - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United States is offering Russia an opportunity to discuss its security concerns in Europe, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday.

"The United States has been clear. If this is truly about Russia's security concerns in Europe, we're offering them an opportunity to address these concerns at the negotiating table," Thomas-Greenfield said during a UN Security Council meeting dedicated to threats to international peace and security of Ukraine.

Thomas-Greenfield said this is a test of Russia's good faith in the coming days and weeks regarding "whether they will come to that table and stay at that table until we reach an understanding."

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US Sanctions 7 Individuals, 2 Entities Over Ties to Myanmar Military - Treasury
(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-6, 8, 9, 11, 12)

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) on Monday added seven individuals and two entities to its sanctions list over their alleged links to the Myanmar military.

The sanctions come as Myanmar is set to mark the first anniversary of the military coup on February 1.

"The following individuals have been added to OFAC's SDN list: OO, Thida..., OO, Tin ... OO, Tun Tun, TAY ZA, Htoo Htet..., TAY ZA, Pye Phyo ..., THAUNG, Jonathan Myo Kyaw ..., ZA, Tay," OFAC said in a press release.

It is alleged by the OAFAC that Thida Oo, Attorney General of Myanmar, and Tun Tun Oo, Chief Justice of Myanmar's Supreme Court, have been responsible for politically motivated charges against a number of pro-democracy figures in the country, including Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint, the release said.

Tay Za is designated for being the owner of several companies that provide equipment and services to the Myanmar military and was a member of a May 2021 delegation to Russia, according to the release.

Tin Oo is chairman of the Myanmar Anti-Corruption Commission who has brought "spurious" corruption charges against Aung San Suu Kyi and other former civilian government officials, the release said.

The sanctions also target the Myanmar Directorate of Procurement of the Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services Army and KT Services & Logistics Company, Ltd (KTSL).

KTSL is designated for being owned or controlled by the Myanmar military or security forces while the Directorate of Procurement has been allegedly responsible for the purchase of arms and equipment for use by the military, the release said.

The new sanctions are part of a joint move with the United Kingdom and Canada, who are each designating two Myanmar government officials, the release said.

At the same time, OFAC removed Oman Pride, a crude oil tanker, from its sanctions list. It was designated in August over alleged links to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Last week, the United States issued an advisory to warn companies and individuals of heightened risks of doing business in Myanmar due to the unstable situation in the country after the military took power a year ago.

The military came to power in Myanmar on February 1 on the pretext that the ruling National League for Democracy party had rigged the November 2020 general election.

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US Hopes Russia Will Choose Path of Diplomacy Instead of Conflict in Ukraine - UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes Russia will choose a diplomatic path, not a conflict, to resolve the crisis around Ukraine, Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday.

"We continue to hope Russia chooses the path of diplomacy over the path of conflict in Ukraine. But we cannot just wait and see," Thomas-Greenfield told a UN Security Council meeting.

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UN Urges All Sides to Refrain From Provocative Rhetoric on Ukraine Crisis

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo on Monday called on all sides to refrain from a provocative rhetoric on the Ukraine crisis and focus on pursuing diplomatic solutions.

"We urge and expect all actors to build on these efforts and to remain focused on pursuing diplomatic solutions by engaging in good faith," DiCarlo said during a UN Security Council meeting. "We further urge all actors to refrain from provocative rhetoric and actions to maximize the chance for diplomacy to succeed."

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UNSC Votes to Proceed With Public Meeting on Ukraine, While Russia, China Oppose

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council voted on Monday to proceed with a public meeting on Ukraine, with Russia and China opposing the move.

Ten members of the council voted in favor of the meeting, two against, and three abstained.

The Russian ambassador to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, dismissed the US-proposed meeting as a "classic example of megaphone diplomacy."

China's Permanent Representative Zhang Jun, who voted against as well, explained that this is "the right time calling for quiet diplomacy with more diplomatic efforts instead of microphone diplomacy or public confrontation."

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Russia Asks UN Security Council to Vote on Holding US-Proposed Meeting on Ukraine - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, January 31 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia on Monday asked the UN Security Council to vote on holding a public meeting on the situation concerning Ukraine proposed by the United States.

"The Russian Federation is asking for a procedural vote on the proposal to hold this meeting on the initiative of the United States," Nebenzia said. "This is not only unacceptable interference in the domestic affairs of our state, but also an attempt to mislead the international community on the situation in the region."

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Canada's Trudeau Says Tested Positive for COVID-19, Will Continue Working Remotely

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Monday that he has tested positive for COVID-19 and will continue working remotely. Trudeau said on Thursday he would be isolating for five days after being exposed to someone with COVID-19.

"This morning, I tested positive for COVID-19. I'm feeling fine – and I'll continue to work remotely this week while following public health guidelines," Trudeau wrote on Twitter. "Everyone, please get vaccinated and get boosted."

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US to Hit Putin's Inner Circle With Sanctions in Event of Ukraine 'Invasion' - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 31 (Sputnik) - The US has prepared a list of people close to President Vladimir Putin to target with sanctions should Russia advance on Ukraine, the Financial Times reported on Monday, citing senior administration officials.

The list has reportedly been coordinated with US allies, focusing on the Russian leader's inner circle and their family members, many of whom have "deep financial ties with the west."

"The individuals we have identified are in or near the inner circles of the Kremlin and play a role in government decision making or are at a minimum complicit in the Kremlin's destabilizing behaviour," unnamed US officials said.

The officials did not reveal what names are on the list, which is said to include top Russian officials and executives of state-owned companies.

The newspaper noted that sanctions would cut them off from the international financial system.

On Sunday, UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said that London is not ruling out the possibility of seizing the British property of Russian "oligarchs" as part of tighter sanctions against Moscow in the event of escalation in Ukraine. When asked if it will affect British investors, Truss noted that "freedom and democracy" are "more important than immediate financial issues."

In a comment on Monday, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova urged Truss "not to take a step back" and reminded her of a list of former corrupt officials whom Russia has long asked to extradite.

Russia has repeatedly denied preparing an invasion of Ukraine. Moscow says that it has the right to move troops within its national territory and is not threatening anyone, dismissing the West's allegations to the contrary as a pretext for NATO's increased activity near Russian borders.